

# Communities of Play

Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds

*Celia Pearce and Artemesia*

forewords by  
Tom Boellstorff and Bonnie A. Nardi

The MIT Press Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England

© 2009 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information about special quantity discounts, please email [special\\_sales@mitpress.mit.edu](mailto:special_sales@mitpress.mit.edu)

This book was set in Janson Text, Rotis Semi Sans, and Rotis Sans by Graphic Composition, Inc., Bogart, Georgia.

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pearce, Celia.

Communities of play : emergent cultures in multiplayer games and virtual worlds / Celia Pearce and Artemesia.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-16257-9 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Internet games—Social aspects. 2. Fantasy games—Social aspects. 3. Role playing—Social aspects. 4. Shared virtual environments—Social aspects. 5. Communities.

6. Community life. I. Title.

GV1469.17.S63P42 2009

794.8'1—dc22

2008042150

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## COMMUNITIES OF PLAY AND THE GLOBAL PLAYGROUND

### Communities of Play

Play communities are neither new nor unique to the Internet. They surround us in many forms, from chess and bridge clubs to sports leagues to golf buddies to summer camps; from *Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing on tabletops to outdoor historical reenactments of renaissance faires or famous Civil War battles. As commonplace as these practices are, with the exception of sports, adult play tends to be marginalized in the U.S. and Europe. As anthropologist Richard Schechner has noted, “In the West, play is a rotten category tainted by unreality, inauthenticity, duplicity, make-believe, looseness, fooling around, and inconsequentiality” (1988).

In spite of this, anthropologists have long noted the deep connection between play and more serious traditional forms of ritual and performance, many of which involve the adoption of alternative roles or personas (van Gennep 1909, Schechner and Schuman 1976, Turner 1982). In contemporary society, this takes the form of ritually sanctioned celebrations such as Mardi Gras and Halloween (Santino 1983), which create allowances for adults to engage in fantasy role-play as part of provisional, short-term, play communities. Mardi Gras also supports a year-round culture of creativity devoted to the crafting of floats, costumes, and other ritual artifacts (Schindler 1997).

Yet in many other contexts, such ongoing play communities tend to be viewed as outside the norm. This is especially true of communities whose play cultures are deeply tied to imagination, fantasy, and the creation of a fictional identity, such as “Trekkies,” who engage in role-play around the television series *Star Trek* (Jenkins 1992). Like participants in historical reenactments (Horwitz 1998, Miller 1998), live-action and tabletop role-playing games (Fine 1983), and the Burning Man festival (Gilmore and Van Proyen 2005), these play communities devote a high level of effort and creativity to their play culture, often to the bewilderment of the population at large (figure 1.1).



| Figure 1.1 |

Participants in the 2004 Burning Man festival. (Image: Jacquelyn Ford Morie)

Nonetheless, social play is a rapidly expanding category in the entertainment landscape. Cosplay, the practice of dressing up in costume, has gained widespread acceptance in Japan (Winge 2007). The Dragon\*Con fan convention, which embraces a range of role-playing traditions, including cosplay and other fan practices, attracted over 30,000 participants in 2007, over twenty times the attendees of its inaugural event in 1987 (Dragon\*Con 2008). The same year, over 47,000 people attended Burning Man, an annual festival/campout combining art, role-playing, and creative expression in the Nevada desert (Red Rock LLC 2007).

What do we mean when we say “play community”? As a pervasive element of diverse human cultures, anthropologists have long had a fascination with play and its social function, some devoting much of their oeuvre to the subject (Schechner and Schuman 1976, Turner 1982, Sutton-Smith 1981). Johan Huizinga, considered

the father of “ludology” (a term used to describe the study of digital games), defines play as

a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious,” but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. ([1938] 1950, 13)

What type of groupings, and what do we mean by “community”? Pioneering German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies described community (*Gemeinschaft*) as an association of individuals with a collective will that is enacted through individual effort. Communities take varying forms, from religious sects to neighborhoods, and are characterized by affiliations around a group identity that includes shared customs, folkways, and social mores. Typically, the will of individuals within a community is, to a certain extent, subjugated to the greater good (Tönnies [1887] 1988, 209).

I’ve adopted the term “communities of play” as a deliberate counterpoint to “communities of practice,” a term originated in anthropology and widely adopted in Internet studies and computer-mediated communication. A community of practice is defined as a group of individuals who engage in a process of collective learning and maintain a common identity defined by a shared domain of interest or activity (Lave and Wenger 1991). The types of communities that fall under this definition tend to convene around forms of work or folk practice. Obviously, communities of practice and communities of play share much in common, and one could even argue that play is a type of practice; however, the adoption of a new term suggests that play practices warrant their own understanding of how communities form and are maintained, a subject that becomes particularly pertinent in the context of technologically mediated play.

With the emergence of digital networks, whole new varieties of adult play communities have begun to appear, enabled by desktop computers and pervasive global networks whose advanced graphical and transmission capabilities were once confined to university research labs. Some of these are extensions of nondigital forms of play, while others offer entirely new experiences and playscapes. Networks amplify the scale, progression, and geographical reach of play communities, allowing them to grow much larger much faster than their offline counterparts. These phenomena

give rise to new creative playgrounds, not only within discrete networked play spaces, but also through real-world interventions, such as “alternate reality” and “big games,” which take place across multiple media and in the physical world; “smart mobs,” large group interactions enabled by mobile technologies; and other emerging forms of play that blur the boundaries between real and virtual, everyday life and imagination, work and play.

Marshall McLuhan coined the term “global village” to describe the shared storytelling space of television (1964). He noted that large, dispersed groups could convene over this new “electronic hearth” to engage in an intimate, simultaneous experience that was once restricted to geographic co-presence. In a similar way, networked games have created a kind of participatory “global playground” where people can now interact dynamically in real time and build new and increasingly complex play communities that traverse geographical and temporal boundaries.

This book is primarily concerned with the emerging genre of massively multiplayer online worlds, variously known as MMOGs, MMOWs, virtual worlds, and metaverses. The most common of these new global playgrounds is the MMORPG, or massively multiplayer online role-playing game, in which players develop roles derived from fantasy literature to engage in epic fictions. Alongside this genre is the open-ended Web 2.0 “sandbox”-style environment, MMOW (massively multiplayer online world), virtual world, or metaverse, whose denizens play a part in actually shaping the world. These two genres encompass a vast landscape of networked playgrounds in which a variety of play communities and emergent social phenomena develop.

Within these pages, we will explore the ways in which play communities are formed and sustained, and the intersection between their emergent behavior and the design of the global playgrounds they inhabit. Who is attracted to different types of digital playgrounds, and therefore what initial preferences and play patterns do they bring? What is it about play environments themselves that encourages certain types of communities to form? How do their design, governance, and ongoing management affect emergent cultures of play? How do players both leverage and subvert these playgrounds to their own ends? And what happens when the powers that be decide a playground is no longer financially sustainable? What if a play community’s commitment to each other and to its collective identity transcends the individual worlds they inhabit? What if they carry the culture of one virtual world into another?

At the heart of this book is the story of one specific play community, members of the Uru Diaspora, a group of players cast out of an online game to become refugees. It is the story of the bonds they formed in spite of—indeed *because* of—this shared trauma, and about their tenacious determination to remain together and to reclaim

---

and reconfigure their own unique group identity and culture. It is a story about the power of play to coalesce a community beyond the boundaries of the game in which it formed, and into the real world itself.

Along the way we shall also look at some key concepts used to analyze these phenomena. In book I, we shall take a brief tour of the history of multiplayer games, starting with the first recorded examples of games played in 3500 BCE, up to the advent of the digital game. We shall briefly look at the history of online playgrounds, their context and origins in analog games, in order to frame both the core audiences and the design conventions of these games. We shall provide an overview of virtual worlds—“ecosystems of play,” as I term them—and their unique properties that create a context for emergent behavior and cultures. We shall define the key concepts “emergence” and “culture” and describe criteria for their study. Book I closes with an in-depth discussion of theoretical and methodological frameworks used in the study, drawing from contemporary anthropology and sociology.

Book II chronicles the history of the Uru Diaspora and its migration to other worlds, focusing on an eighteen-month ethnography conducted during 2004 and 2005. This section is presented in the style of a traditional anthropological monograph, including a narrative of the group’s history, followed by an analysis of its patterns of emergent culture. The narrative focuses on The Gathering of Uru and its journey into and around *There.com* in search of a homeland, and looks secondarily at productive play within the Uru community in *Second Life*.

Book III details the methodology used to conduct the research and also discusses the way the methodology was refined and adapted over the course of the research. This section will be of particular interest to ethnographers and game scholars who are interested in venturing into this research domain. Book IV provides a more intimate look at the day-to-day experience of playing and performing ethnography, including its stumbles and epiphanies, also of utility to ethnographers and researchers. Book V includes a coda on events that took place *after* the core study was conducted. It also provides concluding thoughts and discusses the broader implications of the study on game design and community management, as well as current trends in the global playground that will make the subject of play communities increasingly relevant in the future.

### **Multiplayer Games from 3500 BCE to the Twenty-First Century**

While massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) are lauded as the newest and fastest-growing genre of computer games, they could as much be viewed as a return to the natural order of things. The advent of single-player genres as the central paradigm

---

for games is an historical aberration of digital technology (Pearce 1997, Herz 1997). Prior to the introduction of the computer as a game-playing platform, the majority of games played by hundreds of cultures for thousands of years, with few exceptions, were multiplayer. From their first evidence, such as the Egyptian Senet, the Mesopotamian Ur, and the ancient African game of mancala, to the traditional Chinese games of Go and Mah Jongg, to chess, whose multicultural odyssey spanned India and the Middle East to become a European perennial (Yalom 2004), games were predominately multiplayer.

The advent of mass production enabled new forms of single-player game, such as the puzzle, but even board games of the industrial age and playing cards, which have some single-player variants, continued primarily in this multiplayer tradition. With the rise of the middle class during the Industrial Revolution, board games became a centerpiece of the American and European parlor, joined in the mid-twentieth century by the television (Hofer 2003, Orbanes 2003).

The earliest computer games continued this multiplayer trajectory. *Tennis for Two*, a *Pong*-like demo developed in 1958 on an oscilloscope, and the 1969 classic *Spacewar!* were both multiplayer games. The first video game console, the Magnavox Odyssey, released in 1972, merged multiplayer board game conventions with the emerging medium of television to create a new form of family entertainment. Japanese console pioneer Nintendo started out as a card game company, and introduced its Famicom, later called the Nintendo Entertainment System, with a similar social orientation. Atari's 1972 arcade classic *Pong* is a highly social game, often appearing in two- or even four-player tabletop versions in pizza parlors.

The reasons a cultural practice that was definitively social for thousands of years transformed into a predominately solo activity are complex. The industrial-age arcade paradigm of player versus machine, the capability to create an automated opponent, the paradigm of personal computing, the technical constraints of platforms, and the limited availability of networks were all contributing factors. It was not until the introduction of widely available computer networks that we began to see a return to the dominant historical paradigm of the multiplayer game.

From the moment that networks began to appear in labs on college campuses, people tried to play on them. Today's massively multiplayer online games descend from the same college hacker tradition that spawned *Spacewar!*. While a complete history of MMOGs and MMOWs is beyond the scope of this book, understanding something about their origins will help to unpack fundamental questions about the complex relationship between designer and player: in what contexts are these games created, and by whom? What are their underlying values and cultures? What types

---



of players do designers anticipate will play these games? What types do they actually attract? And what sorts of emergent behaviors are these players likely to exhibit when their play styles come into contact with the affordances of the game software?

The fantasy role-playing genre epitomized by games such as *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, and *World of Warcraft* has its roots in early text-based MUDs (multiuser dungeons or domains), which in turn derive their underlying mechanics from tabletop role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D). D&D in turn arose out of a long-standing tradition of tabletop strategy games. These can be traced even further back to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century army miniatures, revived in the twentieth century by science fiction author H. G. Wells's classic volume of war gaming rules: *Little Wars: A Game for Boys from Twelve Years of Age to One Hundred and Fifty and for That More Intelligent Sort of Girl Who Likes Boys' Games and Books* (1913). Wells's title summarizes both the ethos and intended audience of games in this tradition.

Tabletop role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, which built their narratives around high fantasy literature, including J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954, 1954, 1955), Robert E. Howard's *The Conan Chronicles* ([1932–1969] 1989), and others, were extremely popular on college campuses during the 1970s and 1980s. This was also the period and context in which computer networks were beginning to appear throughout the United States and Europe. That these two emerging trends would converge in the minds of (mostly male) computer science students seems almost inevitable, and the result was the text-based *MUD*, a networked, computationally enabled adaptation of the core mechanics of D&D-style games. More followed and soon the conventions of the genre, still confined to the ivory towers of college computer labs, became codified. These games are also tied to the development of text-based single-player adventure games that were concurrently being distributed via ARPANET, the progenitor of the modern Internet.

This lineage has deep implications for the design of contemporary MMOGs and the specific audiences they attract. Although the role-playing genre did expand this audience to a minimal extent, these games have their roots in a fantasy militaristic gameplay that, as Wells's title suggests, is almost exclusively male. The tabletop gaming tradition revolves around elaborate rules that involve dice with as many as twenty sides. In the case of role-playing games like D&D, player characters and their actions are proceduralized through a blend of statistics and die rolls that typically determine the outcome of scenarios. These can vary from combat to spell-casting to tasks such as picking a lock or obtaining information. One of the pleasures of these games is the shared imagination space generated collectively by players. Player creativity has long been a component of tabletop game culture, with players not only contributing to the

---

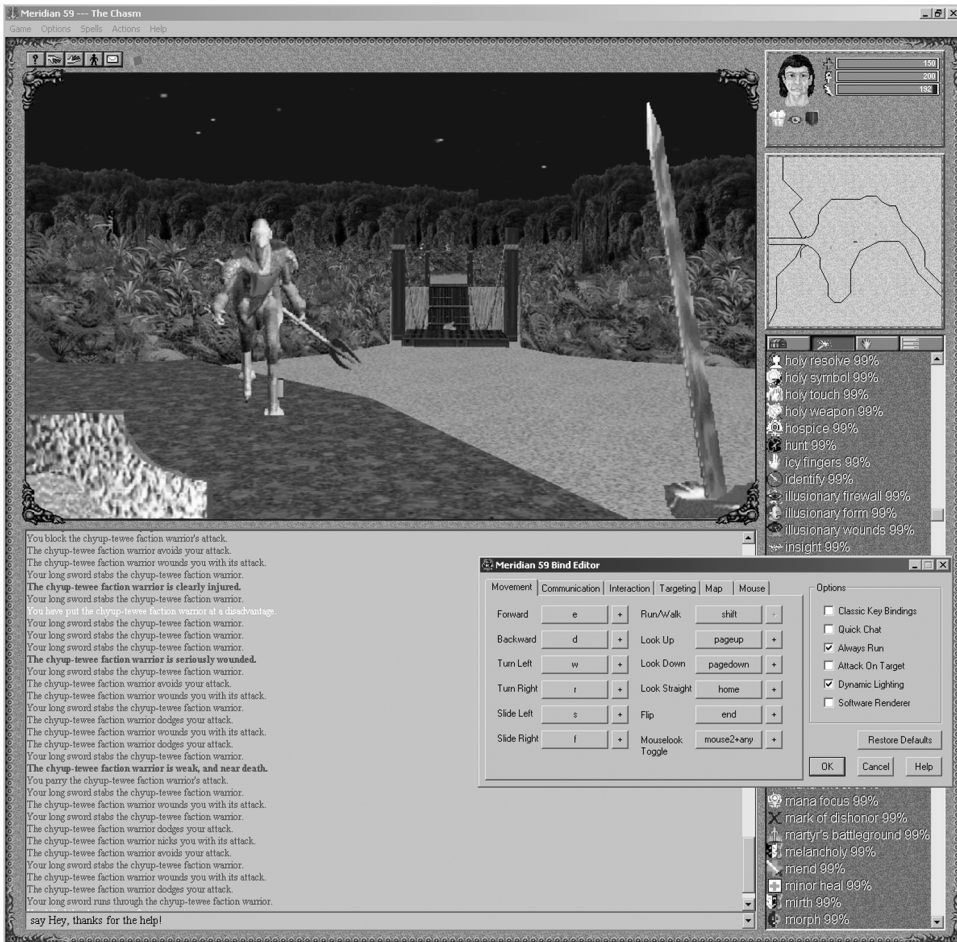


| Figure 1.2 |

*Dungeons & Dragons* player character fan art. (Images: The\_Brave [left] and comethime [right])

storytelling process, but also creating drawings or three-dimensional figures of their characters.

The MUDs spawned by tabletop role-playing sustained a small cult following for a decade and a half, until the mid-1990s, when they were joined by a new generation of games integrating graphics with the other conventions of the genre and targeted to a mass audience. Since then, MMOGs have emerged as the fastest-growing sector of the video game industry. Each new generation of MMOG brings new refinements that include interface improvements, more sophisticated graphics, and increasingly vast worlds, yet their range remains surprisingly narrow. Games like *Meridian 59* (the first graphical game in this genre; see figure 1.3), *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, *Dark Ages of Camelot*, *Asheron's Call*, *Diablo* and Blizzard's second MMOG offering, *World of Warcraft* (which had 10 million subscribers as of this writing), and more recently, *The*



| Figure 1.3 |

The re-release version of *Meridian 59*, launched in 1996, predated *Ultima Online*, which often mistakenly is credited as the first. (Image: Brian "Psychochild" Green, Near Death Studios)



| Figure 1.4 |

Lucasfilm *Habitat*, developed for Quantum Link, a precursor to AOL, and later by Fujitsu. (Image: ©1986 LucasArts Entertainment)

*Lord of the Rings Online* and *Dungeons & Dragons Online*, embody this role-playing, D&D-derived, Tolkienesque fantasy genre. Variants from Korea, such as *Lineage*, *Ragnarok Online*, and *MapleStory* (the world's largest such game, with over 72 million players, and the second-best-selling content card at Target stores as of this writing) (Haro 2007), provide more accessible variants aimed at a younger audience. These are joined by science fiction-themed games such as *Star Wars: Galaxies*, *Planetside*, and *Anarchy Online*, and others with themes such as pirates, superheroes, and horror, many of which build on similar conventions and focus thematically on combat and power fantasies.

Their nongame counterpart, MMOWs, have progressed, perhaps a bit more quietly, alongside MMOGs, and have arguably begun to surpass their gaming cousins in popularity among some demographics. Growing out of the budding game scene, corporate research labs, and the nascent online services industry, graphical social worlds—starting with Lucasfilm's *Habitat* in 1986—predated graphical MMOGs by almost a decade (Morabito 1986, Farmer and Morningstar 1991) (figure 1.4). Admittedly more

low-tech, the earliest virtual worlds were 2-D and provided limited affordances for player creativity. *LambdaMOO*, a text-based environment created in 1991 as an experiment at Xerox PARC (the birthplace of the graphical user interface), introduced the notion of a user-created world that players could extend and expand in seemingly unlimited directions using only words on a screen (Curtis 1992). *LambdaMOO*, still in operation, is the most written-about text-based world; with journalistic, academic, and designer accounts, it has become a bellwether for studies of emergent behavior in virtual worlds (Curtis 1992; Mnookin 1996; Dibbell 1995, 1998; Schiano 1999).

As MMOGs were coming into the mainstream, virtual worlds were also experiencing a boom. Inspired by Neal Stephenson's 1992 cyberpunk classic *Snow Crash*, in the age of what Federal Bank then-chairman Alan Greenspan described as "irrational exuberance," dozens of companies were formed to either create or service the emerging virtual worlds industry. Many of these were based within a few miles of where *Second Life*'s Linden Lab stands today. *Active Worlds*, a graphical virtual world launched in 1995, was the first to follow *LambdaMOO*'s model of user-created content, and remains the longest continuously running entirely user-created virtual world. *Active Worlds* was followed by *OnLive!* in 1996, which is now available as *DigitalSpace Traveler*. Many other virtual worlds opened and closed during this period, including the 2-D chat environment *The Palace* and 3-D worlds *Cybertown* and *Blaxxun* (Damer 1997). Adobe Atmosphere, referenced later in this book, is one of the few world-building tools that survived this period, although it was eventually abandoned by Adobe in 2004.

A decade later, both MMOGs and MMOWs are experiencing another period of phenomenal growth. This has been fueled in part by significant advances in on-board graphics technologies for personal computers and the widespread adoption of broadband Internet, two prerequisites that impeded widespread adoption of early virtual worlds and MMOGs.

On the MMOG side, in addition to mainstream titles in the fantasy and sci-fi genres, smaller independent companies are also flourishing with games that could be described as category challengers. Among these are the popular casual MMOG *Puzzle Pirates*, which has added 4 million registered users since it launched in 2003, and New Medeon's *Whyville*, a science learning MMOG for tweens, which had 3.4 million registered users, 60 percent of whom are female, at the time of this writing. Even *EVE Online*, a popular science fiction world with a sophisticated economy and political system, is considered highly successful and self-sustaining with as few as 250,000 active subscribers.

The MMOW space also continues to expand in a number of different directions. *Second Life* and *There.com* both opened in 2003, and while the former has taken off

as, if not the most popular, at least the most publicized virtual world, the latter has managed to sustain itself through several business transitions. Newer offerings such as *Kaneva* and *Gaia Online* have expanded the range of social worlds. Simpler virtual worlds targeted to kids, which usually have free subscriptions and a virtual items-based economy, are eclipsing even the most popular of their high-end counterparts. *Habbo Hotel*, targeted to tweens, is poised to be the first virtual world to log 100 million subscriptions, albeit not all of them active. These figures, and the imminent release of Sony's *Home*, the first console-based virtual world for the Playstation 3, suggests that virtual worlds may indeed be here to stay. At this writing Google was also throwing its hat into the ring and China had just released its first MMOW, *HiPiHi*.

With all the real and imagined success of MMOGs and MMOWs, there is another more somber side to this narrative: what happens when virtual worlds fail? When new games are released, online games have been known lose audiences in a mass exodus, and the closure of MMOGs and MMOWs is a common occurrence. The very first fantasy-themed graphical MMOG, *Meridian 59*, originally published by 3DO in 1996, closed soon afterward and eventually reinvented itself as a self-sustaining indie enterprise in 2002. Another well-known closure is Microsoft's *Asheron's Call*. We know as little about why multiplayer online games fail as we do about why they succeed. The size of their publishers may be a factor but is no guarantee of success. Why did *World of Warcraft* become a smash hit, but *Star Wars: Galaxies*, built on a perennial, mainstream franchise, turn out to be a weak cult favorite at best? Should sheer quantity of players be the only metric of success? Should we count as successful the smaller, self-sustaining games, like *Meridian 59*? And why do the mid-range games and worlds, such as *Puzzle Pirates*, *Whyville*, *There.com*, and even Disney's groundbreaking but only moderately successful *Toontown*, continue to be overlooked? Even MMOGs backed by big media behemoths, such as Electronic Arts' *The Sims Online*, based on the world's most popular single-player game franchise, re-launched as *EA-Land*, and Disney's *Virtual Magic Kingdom*, were joining the death march to the MMOG graveyard at this writing, even as those same companies were in the midst of launching new products. Since corporations prefer to keep the sources of their failures under wraps, often even couching them as successes, and since there is very little follow-up research on players once they have *left* a game, it is nearly impossible to conduct postmortem analyses of why MMOGs fail.

Among the most-lamented MMOG "failures" is *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*, the subject of this study. Based on and set in the world of the popular single-player *Myst* series, *Uru* departed from many of the traditional conventions of the fantasy-based, D&D-derived MMOGs described earlier by transporting its complex puzzles and

---

unique style of spatial storytelling into a cooperative, multiplayer game. *Uru* had no fighting, no killing, no levels, and no point system. Players worked together to solve interconnected, brain-twisting puzzles, many of which required a familiarity with the elaborate history, cosmology, characters, story line, and even language of the *Myst* series. This included not only knowledge of the world's mythos and back story, but also facility with its arcane technologies, many of which are instrumental in the puzzle-solving mechanics.

As with the *Sims Online*, it would seem that an MMOG based on a top-selling single-player franchise should have been a sure hit. But in spite of its ardent fan base, two successive attempts at launching the game failed to draw the requisite revenue to ensure its ongoing operation. What *Uru* did succeed in doing, however, was to give rise to a small, devoted, resourceful, and tenacious play community with a distinctive play style that set them apart from players of more popular combat-based games such as *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft*. Although the *Uru* community is dwarfed in scale by virtually all of the MMOGs mentioned earlier, its fanbase has exhibited endurance over the long term in the face of trials and tribulations. The phenomenon of the *Uru* Diaspora has outlived both commercial releases of *Uru* combined. Thus, while *Uru* was not a numerical success, I would argue that it was successful in a number of other significant aspects that will emerge as we delve into the narrative of the *Uru* Diaspora in more depth.

The expulsion and mass exodus of Uruvians from their “game of origin” at the precise moment when the third wave of virtual worlds was coming online created a powerful confluence of culture, technology, timing, and opportunity. Because *Uru* and *Myst* players are particularly tenacious and industrious, perhaps in part because of their decade-long encounter with the “Mensa-level” puzzles of *Myst* games (Carroll 1994), they were poised to display a unique form of emergent behavior.

As we will learn, *Uru* players migrated into other virtual worlds, created their own *Uru*-based cultural artifacts, and in some cases created entire facsimiles of areas in *Uru*. They created *Uru* mods in other game engines, including original levels for the game, and they even instigated a network of player-run *Uru* servers to allow players to run the game after its initial closure. This emergent culture, which traversed both games and virtual worlds, provides us with rich insight into the many facets of the interplay between networked play communities and the virtual worlds they inhabit.